AVATAR

The Last Airbender

Show #207

BOOK TWO: EARTH
CHAPTER SEVEN: "Zuko Alone"

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ACT I

EXT. VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY

A short montage of Zuko travelling alone. Though he is unmistakably Prince Zuko -- the same proud man with a bad attitude -- we see the new lows to which he is sinking. His clothes are ragged, and he is beginning to show slight gauntness in his cheeks. His ostrich horse is worn, too.

Zuko rides his ostrich horse through a narrow, misty mountain pass with a dizzying aerial view.

In the pouring rain, Zuko leads his ostrich horse over a suspension bridge spanning a rivered gorge.

Later, Zuko hears something, and stops. He peers through some bushes to see a COUPLE picnicking. As the smoke from the small roasted rodent they're eating reaches him, Zuko gets a look of determination. He looks at his broadswords and Blue Spirit mask protruding from his saddle bag. He puts his hand on the hilt of a sword, but when he looks up and notices: the man gently places his hand on the woman's stomach. From her new pose, we can see she is pregnant. Zuko releases his grip on his swords. He grabs his own stomach, and winces.

Nearby, he finds another picnic site which has been abandoned. There is something wrapped in parchment, and he rushes over to retrieve it. When he opens it, it is a piece of rotten meat. The putrid smell causes Zuko to turn away, and GAG -- he covers his mouth. Then he flash-cooks the meat with a Firebending blast, and eats the scrap. He lies back, contemplating his plight. He turns his head to the side -- he hallucinates a WOMAN, whom we later learn is his mother. He closes his eyes tight, as we

FADE TO WHITE:

FADE IN:

EXT. "ROCK BOTTOM" - SMALL EARTH KINGDOM TOWN - DAY

It's a small, Earth Kingdom town square. Merchants sit before storefronts and a few local people mill about. A group of four meaty Earth Kingdom SOLDIERS (think "Thugs") play dice on the ground. One Thug rolls a die.

THUG #1
Come on spider-snake eyes!

He rolls a SIX, GUFFAWS, and CHEERS raucously for himself. Doing a little 'I win' dance, he kicks up DUST. The other thugs COUGH, then they angrily take him down.

Suddenly they’re all brawling. Just at this moment, Zuko rides his ostrich horse into town. All eyes turn to him, ‘the mysterious stranger.’ The thugs stop fighting and stare him down, but Zuko returns their stare unflinchingly. He dismounts, finds a FEED MERCHANT, hands him some coins, and gestures to the ostrich horse.

ZUKO
Could I get some water, a bag of feed, and something hot to eat?

The merchant scrutinizes the three tiny coins in his hand.

FEED MERCHANT
Not enough here for a hot meal...

A beat as the merchant looks at Zuko, feeling sorry for him.

FEED MERCHANT (cont’d)
I could get you two bags of feed?

Zuko nods gratefully. As the merchant goes to get the feed, Zuko sits down on the stoop. A small gang of KIDS sneak up on the thugs -- one of the kids wields an EGG. (From where Zuko sits, he can see both the kids and the thugs, but the thugs can’t see the kids.) One of the thugs is PELTED!

THUG #2
Oww!

Zuko sees the kids melt into the woodwork -- the thugs look in the direction the egg came from, and zero in on Zuko. Their leader, GOW, approaches Zuko. Twin BATTLE HAMMERS hang at his sides. The rest of the thugs follow, surrounding Zuko, who stands up, but stays put.

GOW
(to Zuko)
Hey! You throwing eggs at us, stranger?

ZUKO
No.

GOW
(to Zuko)
You see who did throw it?

Zuko sees the kids peek out anxiously in his direction: will he give them up?

ZUKO
No.

THUG #2
That your favorite word, “No”?

Zuko SHRUGS.

GOW
Egg had to come from somewhere.

ZUKO
(deadpan)
Maybe a chicken flew over.

Thug #2 LAUGHS, but gets a dirty look from Gow. The feed merchant reappears with Zuko’s order. He nervously twines between the thugs to deliver it. Zuko reaches for it, but Gow intercepts, taking the bag of grain for himself.

GOW
(jeering, to Zuko)
Thanks for your contribution. The army appreciates your support.

He tosses the package to one of the thugs.

GOW (cont’d)
You better leave town. Penalty for staying’s a lot steeper than you can afford, stranger. Trust me.

Gow pats his hammers and smiles. It’s takes all of Zuko’s restraint not to retaliate, but he doesn’t need any extra trouble. Gow and his men leave. The merchant returns Zuko’s money, but Zuko refuses.

FEED MERCHANT
Those soldiers are supposed to protect us from the Fire Nation.
(shakes head sadly)
But they’re just a bunch of thugs.

The kid, LEE, who threw the egg, appears beside Zuko.

LEE
Thanks for not ratting me out. I’ll take you to my house and feed your ostrich horse for you.
(beat as Zuko hesitates)
C’mon, I owe you.

Lee takes the reigns of Zuko’s ostrich horse, and leads. Off Zuko’s look of mild discomfort and acceptance.

EXT. - LEE'S FAMILY'S PIG FARM - DAY

As Zuko and Lee approach a modest-sized farm, a ruckus starts up. All manner of pig-hybrid animals -- Wooly-Pigs (pig sheep), Moo-Sows (pig cows), Pickens and Pigsters (pig-chicken and roosters), etc. -- begin "OINKING" at once. It's deafening. Zuko looks at Lee questioningly.

LEE
(shrugging, defensive)
No one can ever sneak up on us!

ZUKO
No kidding.

Lee leads the ostrich horse into the barn. Meanwhile, Sela and Gansu, Lee's mother and father, come out to meet 'the Stranger.' Gansu is a large, powerful looking farmer.

GANSU
You a friend of Lee's?

Before Zuko can reply, Lee rushes out of the barn.

LEE
This guy just stood up to the soldiers. By the end he practically had them running away!

Sela smiles.

SELA
Does "this guy" have a name?

ZUKO
(hesitating)
I'm -- Uh.

GANSU
He doesn't have to say who he is, if he doesn't want to, Sela.
(to Zuko)
Anyone who can hold his own against those bully 'soldiers', is welcome here. Those men should be ashamed to wear Earth Kingdom uniforms.

SELA
The real soldiers are off fighting the war! Like Lee's big brother, Sen Su.

She looks toward the house.

SELA (cont'd)
(to Zuko)
Supper's going to be ready soon. Would you like to stay?

ZUKO
I can't -- I should be moving on.

SELA
(insisting)
Gansu could use some help on the barn. Why don't you two work for a while, and then we'll eat?

Zuko nods, accepting her offer. Gansu lumbers toward the barn, waving Zuko along with him. Lee follows.

EXT. - BARN ROOF - DAY

On the roof, Gansu and Lee hammer away expertly, while Zuko works hard, but awkwardly -- inexperienced at manual labor, he has an uncomfortable grip on the hammer and nail.

LEE
You don't seem like you're from around here.

Zuko shakes his head and keeps working.

LEE (cont'd)
Where are you from then?

ZUKO
Far away.

LEE
Oh.
(a beat)
Where are you going?

Zuko shrugs slightly, keeping his head down.

GANSU
Lee, give it a rest. Stop asking the man personal questions, got it?

LEE
(SIGHS) Yes.
(a beat, to Zuko)
So how'd you get that scar?

Zuko SLAMS his thumb with his hammer -- he grimaces silently. Gansu puts his tool down and comes over to Lee.

GANSU
It’s not nice to bother people about things they might not want to talk about. A man’s past is his business.

Lee nods. They go back to work. Off Zuko’s look as he seems to ponder these words.

---FLASHBACK---

EXT. - TURTLE DUCK POND - DAY

Zuko, ten years old, and his mother, Ursa, walk on the banks of a pond feeding turtle ducks: a beautiful, idyllic scene.

YOUNG ZUKO
Hey Mom, want to see how Azula feeds turtle ducks?

Before she can respond, Zuko throws a big piece of bread AT, rather than TO a baby turtle duck. It hits the baby.

URSA
Zuko! Why would you do that-- ?

Suddenly Zuko starts to YELP and jump around. Ursa runs to him. The mother turtle duck has attached herself, snapping turtle-style to Zuko’s bare ankle. Finally she lets go, slips back into the water, and ushers her babies away. Zuko holds his wounded ankle.

YOUNG ZUKO
Stupid turtle duck! Why did she do that?

Ursa kneels at Zuko’s feet, tenderly tending his wound.

URSA
Zuko, that’s what moms are like. If you mess with their babies--
(BITING SOUND)

Suddenly playful, she pretends to BITE him.

URSA (cont’d)
They’re gonna bite you back!

They both LAUGH at her joke.

EXT. - FIRELORD'S ROYAL PALACE - GROUNDS - DAY

Zuko and Ursa approach the Palace. Nine-year-old Azula, Mai and Ty Lee cart-wheel on the lawn, but only Ty Lee is good.

YOUNG TY LEE
Azula!

When Mai sees Zuko she blushes and gets awkward. Azula notices this and gets an idea: she whispers something to Ty Lee. They both GIGGLE. Azula runs up to Zuko and her mom.

YOUNG AZULA
Watch this.
(beat)
Mom, can you make Zuko play with us? We need equal teams to play a game.

YOUNG ZUKO
I am NOT cart-wheeling!

YOUNG AZULA
You won't have to. Cart-wheeling's not a game.
(sotto)
Dum-dum.

YOUNG ZUKO
I don't care. I don't want to play with you.

YOUNG AZULA
We are brother and sister -- it's important for us to spend time together. Don't you think so, Mom?

It's obvious Ursa would like to be on her own awhile.

URSA
(to Zuko)
Yes, darling, I think it's a good idea to play with your sister. Go on now, just for a little while.

Ursa leaves. Azula gives Zuko a self-satisfied smile. They both know she's manipulated Mom and gotten her way.

YOUNG AZULA
Here's the way it goes.

She stands Mai in front of her, placing an apple on her head.

YOUNG AZULA (cont'd)
Now what you do is, try to knock the apple off the other person's head... Like this.

Before Mai can even flinch, Azula bends fire at the apple on Mai's head, but instead of knocking it off her head, the apple CATCHES FIRE! Zuko tackles Mai, tipping them both into a nearby water fountain. They stand up, wet and awkward.

YOUNG AZULA (cont'd)
(laughing, to Ty Lee)
See? I told you it would work!

YOUNG TY LEE
Aw, they're so cute together.

YOUNG MAI
(mortified, to Azula and Ty Lee)
You two are such-- !

Zuko (showing early predilection) storms off toward the palace. Ursa emerges, holding a letter.

URSA
I was just coming to get you. Uncle Iroh sent us a letter from the warfront.
(beat)
You're soaking wet.

YOUNG ZUKO
Girls are crazy!

He storms inside.

INT. - PALACE LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ursa holds the letter, while Zuko and Azula sit on either side of her, reading over her shoulder.

UNCLE (V.O.)
...if the city is as magnificent as its wall, Ba Sing Se must be something to behold. I hope you all may see it someday -- If we don't burn it to the ground first!

They all CHUCKLE at Uncle's joke.

UNCLE (V.O.) (cont'd)
Until then, enjoy these gifts.

Zuko and Azula exchange a glance, “Gifts?!”

UNCLE (V.O.) (cont’d)
For Zuko, a pearl dagger from the general who surrendered when we broke through the outer wall. Note the inscription, and the superior craftsmanship.

A servant presents Zuko with an exquisite pearl-handled dagger. Azula looks on jealously. Zuko reads, smiling.

YOUNG ZUKO
“Never give up without a fight.”

UNCLE (V.O.)
And for Azula...

A servant comes out bearing...

UNCLE (V.O.) (cont’d)
A new friend! She wears the latest fashion for Earth Kingdom girls.

It’s a doll. Azula rolls her eyes in disgust. Ursa lowers the letter, having finished reading it.

YOUNG AZULA
(loud musing)
If Uncle doesn’t make it back from war, then Dad would be next in line to be Fire Lord, wouldn’t he?

URSA
Azula, we don’t speak that way. It would be awful if Uncle Iroh didn’t return. And besides, Fire Lord Azulon is a picture of health.

Azula sulks.

YOUNG ZUKO
How would you like it if Cousin Lu Ten wanted Dad to die?

YOUNG AZULA
I still think <u>our</u> dad would make a much better Fire Lord than His Royal Tea-Loving Kooky-ness.

With that, Azula sets her new doll ablaze.

--BACK TO PRESENT DAY--

INT. - BARN ON PIG FARM - NIGHT

Zuko is asleep in the hay. There is a slight CREAK, and Lee creeps in. He sidles closer to Zuko's bags which hang on the wall. Zuko rolls over. Lee freezes. He waits a moment, then inches closer. Lee reaches into the saddle bag, and pulls out... Zuko's TWIN BROADSWORDS. Soundlessly, Lee leaves. Zuko opens his eyes.

EXT. - PASTURE NEAR FARM - NIGHT

In the dark field, Lee swings the swords wildly in a crude imitation of the moves he's seen other swordsmen do. His skills are lacking, but his gusto unmatched! He's blissfully unaware he could mortally wound himself any second.

ZUKO
(O.S.)
You're holding them all wrong.

Lee jumps a mile and falls into pig dirt. Zuko helps him up. He re-positions Lee's hands on the swords, and adjusts Lee's stance with his feet. Then, looking Lee directly in the eye, he guides Lee's hands, moving the swords together in front of his face. FROM LEE'S P.O.V. HE CAN SEE THE TWO SIDES OF ZUKO'S FACE INDEPENDENTLY: HIS SCARRED SIDE AND HIS UNBROKEN SIDE -- SEPARATED BY THE SWORDS.

ZUKO (cont'd)
Keep in mind: these are dual swords. Two halves of a single weapon. Don't think of them as separate -- Because they're <u>not</u>. They're just two different parts of the same whole.

Zuko lowers the swords and begins guiding Lee through a basic move. Then he stands back and lets Lee try on his own. Lee gets carried away, swinging the swords wildly. In the split second before Lee severely injures himself: zuko grabs Lee's wrist in mid-swing, stopping him just in time. Lee gives the swords back to Zuko. They start to walk home.

LEE
I think you'd really like my brother Sen Su. He used to show me stuff like this all the time.

Zuko looks down at Lee, almost imperceptibly smiling.

EXT. - FARM - NEXT DAY

As Zuko prepares to leave, Sela comes out with a basket.

SELA
Here. This ought to get you through a few meals.

Zuko looks awkward. Gansu claps a big hand on Zuko’s back. Zuko nods at them. Suddenly there is a DUST CLOUD in the distance. The sound of hoof-beats grow louder: the Thugs!

GANSU
What do you think they want?

Zuko narrows his eyes.

ZUKO
Trouble.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II

EXT. FARM - DAY

There's a tense moment as everyone waits for the thugs to arrive. The pig animals begin "OINKING" uproariously.

GANSU
What do you want, Gow?

GOW
(mock sorrow)
Just thought someone ought to tell you: your son's battalion got captured.

Gansu, Sela, Lee and Zuko take this in.

GOW (cont'd)
(to Thugs)
You boys hear what the Fire Nation did with their last group of Earth Kingdom prisoners?

THUG #1
Dressed 'em up in Fire Nation uniforms and put them on the front line unarmed, 'way I heard it.
(he spits)
Then they just watched--

GANSU
You watch your mouth!

In his fury, Gansu lunges and points. It startles Gow's ostrich horse, causing Gow to fall off and into a pile of pig poop. Gow rises, and it looks like there'll be a fight, but Zuko steps up, silently backing Gansu.

GOW
(to Thugs, backing down)
Why bother rooting around in the mud with these pigs?

Gow and his men leave. Sela collapses into Gansu's arms crying as he comforts her. Lee is in shock.

Off Zuko's distant look.

--FLASHBACK--

EXT. - FIRE LORD'S PALACE - DAY

Zuko and Azula play, with Ursa nearby. A Fire Nation messenger rides up with a scroll. Ursa takes the scroll, and reads. She covers her mouth in horror.

URSA
(shaking voice)
Iroh has lost his son. Your cousin Lu Ten did not survive the battle.

Off Zuko's horrified reaction.

--BACK TO PRESENT DAY--

EXT. - FARM - DAY

Gansu, Sela and Lee still reel from the news about Sen Su. Zuko stands nearby.

LEE
What's going to happen to my brother?

GANSU
(resolute)
I'm going to the front. I'm going to find Sen Su and bring him back.

Sela SOBS. Gansu puts his arm around her comfortingly, and leads her inside to pack for his journey. Zuko and Lee are alone. Zuko turns away to adjust a saddle strap. Lee musters some courage.

LEE
When my Dad goes, will you stay?

ZUKO
No. I need to move on.

Zuko finishes the adjustment as Lee stands there sadly. Just as Zuko mounts his ostrich horse and it seems he'll ride away without another word, he stops.

ZUKO (cont'd)
Here. I want you to have this.

He leans down and hands Lee... The PEARL-HANDLED DAGGER.

ZUKO (cont'd)
Read the inscription.

LEE
(reading)
“Made in Earth Kingdom.”

ZUKO
Uh, the other one.

He turns the blade over.

LEE
“Never give up without a fight.”

Before Lee can thank him, Zuko rides away.

EXT. - RIVERBANK NEAR BRIDGE - LATER

Zuko sits on the riverbank while his ostrich horse drinks. He lies back in the grass, remembering.

--FLASHBACK--

INT. - PALACE LIVING ROOM - DAY

Zuko, alone, fights an invisible enemy with his new dagger. Azula comes in and, seeing the knife, frowns jealously. She mimes/imitates his shadow boxing meanly.

YOUNG AZULA
You waste all your time playing with knives! You’re not even good.

YOUNG ZUKO
Put an apple on your head and we’ll find out how good I am.

Zuko waits for her to leave, but instead she sits down.

YOUNG AZULA
By the way, Uncle’s coming home.

YOUNG ZUKO
Does that mean... we won the war?

YOUNG AZULA
No, that means Uncle’s a quitter-- and a loser.

YOUNG ZUKO
What are you talking about? Uncle’s not a quitter.

YOUNG AZULA
Oh yes, he is: he found out his son died and he just fell apart. A real general would stay and burn Ba Sing Se to the ground -- not lose the battle and come home crying.

YOUNG ZUKO
How do you know what he should do? He's probably just sad his only kid is gone. Forever.

Zuko gets upset just thinking about this. Ursa enters.

URSA
Your father has requested an audience with Fire Lord Azulon. Best clothes! Hurry up!

Zuko gets going, but Azula moves slowly.

YOUNG AZULA
(condescending, to Ursa)
Fire Lord Azulon. Can't you just call him "Grandfather"? He's not exactly the powerful Fire Lord he used to be. Someone else will probably end up taking his place soon--

URSA
Young lady! Not - Another - Word!

Azula runs upstairs.

URSA (cont'd)
(sotto)
What is wrong with that child?

Off Ursa's exasperated look.

INT. - FIRELORD'S THRONE ROOM - DAY

Ozai parades freshly groomed, and fancily dressed, Azula and Zuko in front of his father, Azulon. The Fire Lord is old and decrepit, and looks quite creepy and scary. Ozai stands off to the side, in the shadows (like a puppet master).

OZAI
--And how was it Great Grandfather Sozin managed to win the Battle of Han Tui?

YOUNG ZUKO
(struggling)
Great Grandfather won because...

YOUNG AZULA
Because even though his army was outnumbered, he cleverly calculated his advantages: the enemy was downwind and there was a draught. Their defenses burned to a crisp in minutes!

Ozai pats Azula's head, like a pet (if staging allows). She beams.

OZAI
Correct, my dear. Now, would you show Grandfather the new moves you demonstrated to me?

Azulon rolls his eyes, but in a flash Azula is spinning around the room in a truly impressive display of Firebending. As she finishes her routine everyone is amazed.

OZAI (cont'd)
She's a true prodigy!
(bowing to Azulon)
Just like her grandfather for whom she's named.

Azula smiles victoriously. She leans over to Zuko.

YOUNG AZULA
(whispering)
You'll never catch up.

Zuko is sufficiently baited.

YOUNG ZUKO
(to all)
I'd like to demonstrate what <u>I've</u> been learning.

Zuko begins his moves. He holds his own a moment, but he missteps and nearly falls. Knocked off-balance, but still fighting to prove himself, he whirls around and hits a statue, badly stubbing his toe. He continues trying, even harder -- fiercely determined like the Zuko we know -- but again, he fails in some embarrassing manner. He stops, looking as if he might cry. Ursa goes to fuss over him.

YOUNG ZUKO (cont'd)
(devastated)
I failed.

URSA
No, I loved watching you. That's who you are, Zuko: someone who keeps fighting even though it's hard.

Grandfather has had enough.

AZULON
Prince Ozai! Why are you wasting my time with this pomp? Just tell me what you want. Everyone else, go.

Ursa leaves, followed by the children. But at the last second before exiting, Azula grabs Zuko by the arm and pulls him behind a tapestry. There is a slight wave in the tapestry, and we see Azula's little shoes back up so they don't stick out from under the curtain.

INT. - BEHIND TAPESTRY - CONTINUOUS

Azula PINCHES Zuko and points to his feet. He also backs up so his shoes can't be seen.

YOUNG ZUKO
(surprised)
What are you--

YOUNG AZULA
Shh!

Through a tiny sliver between ornate screens they spy on their father and grandfather.

INT. - FIRE LORD'S THRONE ROOM - DAY

Ozai kneels, groveling before Azulon.

OZAI
Father, you must have realized, as I have, that with Lu Ten gone-- Iroh's bloodline has ended.

Ozai pauses, trying to read Azulon's reaction.

OZAI (cont'd)
After his son's death, my brother <u>abandoned</u> the siege at Ba Sing Se.
(MORE)

OZAI(cont'd)
And who knows when he will return home?
(Ozai stands up)
But I am here, Father, and my children are alive.

AZULON
Say what it is you want.

OZAI
(bowing)
Father, revoke Iroh's birthright. I am your humble servant, here to serve you and our nation! Use me.

AZULON
You dare suggest I betray Iroh -- my first-born? Directly after the demise of his only beloved son!

Azulon rises on his own as Ozai trembles at his feet.

AZULON (cont'd)
I think Iroh has suffered enough, but you-- ? Your punishment has SCARCELY BEGUN!

INT. - BEHIND TAPESTRY - SIMULTANEOUS

There is a Firebending explosion of such magnitude that Zuko forgets himself and RUNS from his hiding spot. He scoots right past the guards, terrified. But Azula doesn't follow.

INT. - ZUKO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Zuko is lying in bed reading when Azula bursts in.

YOUNG AZULA
(sing-songy)
Dad's going to kill you!
(then, serious)
Really -- he is.

YOUNG ZUKO
Ha, ha, Azula. Nice try.

YOUNG AZULA
Fine, don't believe me! But I heard everything. Grandfather said Dad's punishment should fit his crime:
(doing imitation)
(MORE)

YOUNG AZULA(cont'd)
“You must know the pain of losing a first-born son -- by sacrificing your own.”

The magnitude and logic of this overwhelm him. Zuko believes her, but cannot accept it.

YOUNG ZUKO
Liar!

YOUNG AZULA
I’m only telling you for your own good.
(beat, gets an idea)
I know! Maybe you could find a nice Earth Kingdom family to adopt you.

YOUNG ZUKO
Stop it! You’re lying. Dad would never do that to me!

URSA (O.S.)
Your father would never do what to you?

Ursa rushes into the room.

URSA (cont’d)
What is going on here?

YOUNG AZULA
(smug, smiling)
I don’t know.

URSA
It’s time for a talk.

Ursa hauls Azula away to question her. Quaking, Zuko jumps up and lights all the lamps in his room. He barricades the door, talking to himself as he does, repeating like a mantra:

YOUNG ZUKO
Azula always lies... Azula always lies...

--BACK TO PRESENT--

EXT. - RIVERBANK NEAR BRIDGE - DAY

Zuko is lying on the riverbank, lost in thoughts of the past.

ZUKO
(sotto)
Azula always lies.

Sela pulls up suddenly in an ostrich horse-drawn cart. She jumps out and runs toward Zuko, nearly hysterical.

SELA
You have to help! It's Lee. The thugs from town came back as soon as Gansu left. When they ordered us to give them food, Lee pulled a knife on them -- I don't even know where he got a knife!

INSERT: A still shot of Lee threatening the five huge thugs with his small knife -- a naive attempt at standing up for himself.

Zuko looks away, knowingly. Sela CRIES.

SELA (cont'd)
Then they -- took him away. They told me if Lee's old enough to fight, he's old enough to join the army.
(a beat)
I know we barely know you, but --
(SOBBING)

Zuko watches her sob, then he makes up his mind.

ZUKO
I'll get your son back.

Off Zuko's look of determination.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT III

EXT. - ROAD TO TOWN - DAY

Zuko rides into town. He looks less like a drifter, and more like a man about to kick some thug tail. His BROADSWORDS saltate at his sides.

EXT. - TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Lee is chained up just outside the doorway of the usurped meeting hall. He WHOOPS when he sees Zuko.

LEE
(to anyone in earshot)
Hey, there he is! I told you he'd come!

The thugs, including Gow, gather ominously as Zuko nears. Zuko walks his ostrich horse almost to where the thugs stand. They have to crane their necks to look up at him. Then Zuko jumps down and looks Gow in the eye.

ZUKO
Let the kid go.

Gow starts to CACKLE as if this is the funniest thing he's ever heard. Then he stops abruptly.

GOW
Who do you think you are? Telling us what to do.

ZUKO
It doesn't matter who I am.

Zuko looks at each of the thugs in turn.

ZUKO (cont'd)
But I know who you are: you're not soldiers, you're bullies, freeloaders abusing your power.
(he sneers)
Mostly over women and kids. You don't want Lee in your army: you're sick cowards messing with a family who's already lost one son to the war.

What Zuko says is accurate. Gow notices the thugs are beginning to look ashamed.

GOW
(to thugs)
Are you going to let this stranger stand there and insult you like this?!

Gow stands back as the thugs spring into action. Zuko takes out the first thug to jump him using just the scabbard of his sword, then draws his swords and deftly begins to fight the others. The thugs attack with formidable brute force; outnumbering him and fighting dirty. (Zuko does not use Firebending, in order to keep his identity hidden.) As Zuko holds his own, a CROWD of townspeople begins to gather, including Sela.

An OLD MAN with a bandaged leg balances on his crutches, and swings his arms along with Zuko's moves.

OLD MAN
Give 'em a left! A left.

OLD LADY
(to Old Man)
It's not a fist fight.

OLD MAN
He's got a left sword, don't he?

The crowd CHEERS at appropriate moments, clearly showing their support for Zuko against these bullies. Zuko is a whirling, twirling fighting machine. One by one he disarms, knocks out, or incapacitates the thugs. Finally Zuko beats the last of the thugs. There's a HUSH as Zuko stops to catch his breath.

OLD MAN (cont'd)
(shrill)
LOOK OUT!

LEE
Behind you!

Zuko turns to see Gow almost upon him with his TWIN HAMMERS. They clash. But now Zuko is tired, and Gow is fresh. In a moment everyone understands what made Gow the leader: He's not only a tremendous Earthbender, but his hammer skills easily match Zuko's swordsmanship. Zuko is able to hold his own for a while, but we can see he is losing traction, and the tide of this fight is turning.

Gow bends up a mammoth chunk of earth, and as it's still in the air, hits it with his hammers. Boulders fly off, connecting with Zuko's weapons.

One of Zuko’s swords is knocked clear out of his hand -- he races to retrieve it under a new shower of rocks.

The crowd is becoming subdued as they watch their champion fade. They let up a communal GROAN/GASP as Gow pins Zuko to the ground. Sela hides her eyes, and Lee beckons silently:

Even Zuko can’t believe this is happening. Gow lifts his mighty hammer high, about to deliver the final blow...

--FLASHBACK--

INT. ZUKO’S BEDROOM - MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Zuko is fast asleep when he is suddenly awoken by Ursa sitting on his bed beside him. The lamps Zuko lit have all burned down and she’s as dark as a shadow in a long, black, hooded cape. She clutches Zuko tight to her.

ZUKO
(groggy)
Mom?

URSA
(urgent whispering)
Zuko. Please, my love, listen to me!

Zuko can’t keep his eyes open, he slumps. She holds him upright, shaking him, trying to get him to listen.

URSA (cont’d)
Everything I've done, I've done to protect you.

Zuko slumps against her. Ursa hears a noise and looks around wildly. She pulls the hood of her cape over her head. Then as she hugs Zuko -- for the last time...

URSA (cont’d)
(pleading)
Remember this, Zuko, no matter how things may seem to change: <u>Never forget who you are</u>!

Zuko falls back onto his bed, already asleep again.

--BACK TO PRESENT--

EXT. - TOWN SQUARE - A MOMENT LATER

Zuko, still pinned by Gow, is about to be dealt the Final Blow.

LEE
(sotto)
Get up...

A flicker of new resolve passes over Zuko's sweating face. His eyes begin to burn. Suddenly a blistering column of fire explodes from under Gow. Singed and shocked he leaps back with a YELP. The crowd stands riveted as Zuko jumps up and bends another spate of fire at Gow -- they don't understand how he's Firebending.

Zuko's swords now scintillate with fire as he combines Firebending with swordsmanship and goes after Gow with renewed determination. Zuko brings him to his knees. Gow crawls a few inches, then collapses to the ground.

GOW
Who... Who are you?

ZUKO
(to all)
My name is Zuko, son of Ursa and Firelord Ozai, Prince of the Fire Nation and heir to the throne.

The frightened crowd begins to RUMBLE amongst themselves, confused. It dawns on them that their hero is also their enemy, and they don't know what to make of this. The old man is the first to turn on Zuko...

OLD MAN
Liar! I've heard of you. You're not a prince, you're an <u>outcast</u>!
(to Crowd)
His own father burned and disowned him!

The RUMBLING grows more intense. Zuko ignores it. He spots the pearl dagger in the back pocket of Gow's uniform. Gow cowers as Zuko takes it, and goes to find Sela and Lee. But as he nears them, Sela pushes Lee behind her in a protective gesture.

SELA
Not a step closer!

Lee peeks his head out from behind Sela to see what's going on. Zuko kneels down, offering him the dagger.

ZUKO
It's yours. You should have it.

But Lee shakes his head, refusing it.

LEE
No! I hate you!

Lee backs away, pulling Sela with him. Zuko is left alone holding the dagger.

--FLASHBACK--

INT. - ZUKO'S BEDROOM - DAY

Zuko wakes with a start in his bed. He looks over at his door -- still barricaded. Then he looks over at his large window: it's wide open and the wind is blowing in. Suddenly he remembers.

ZUKO
Mom? Mom!

He runs to the door, unblocks it, and runs into the hallway.

ZUKO (cont'd)
MOM!

Zuko's voice ECHOES in the empty hallway.

INT. - PALACE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Azula is alone, playing with Zuko's dagger in exactly the way he was before. When Zuko runs in, she hides it behind her back.

ZUKO
(urgent)
Where's Mom?

Azula smiles and narrows her eyes.

AZULA
No one knows.
(a beat)
Oh, and last night -- Grandpa passed away.

Zuko's convinced she's teasing him.

ZUKO
Not funny, Azula. You're sick.

She shrugs. He comes toward her.

ZUKO (cont'd)
And I want my knife back. Now!

Azula jumps away, holding the knife up, ready to play 'keep away.' Zuko grabs for it.

AZULA
Who's going to make me -- Mom?

Zuko decides this is more trouble than it's worth. He lets the knife go for now, and runs off.

EXT. - PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Zuko runs out into the gardens and spots Ozai pacing the grounds. He runs up to him. Ozai stops walking and stands still.

ZUKO
Where is she?

To Zuko's horror, Ozai won't turn around to answer his question. Zuko goes pale -- it is at this moment that it sinks in that he may never see her again.

INT. - ROYAL THRONE ROOM - DAY

The passing of the Fire Lord's crown is a double ceremony in the Fire Nation: a funeral and a coronation in one.

Zuko and Azula, formally dressed, stand at the foot of the throne flanked and proceeded by MOURNERS: servants, royal citizens and members of the military.

On the throne, Ozai stands next to Azulon's sarcophagus (carved and painted to resemble him) laid out on a funeral pyre. He still bears the Fire Lord's crown. A Fire Nation HIGH SAGE steps forward and begins a solemn eulogy, as another sage bends fire, igniting the pyre. (Note for storyboard: handle with care.)

HIGH SAGE
Azulon, Fire Lord to our Nation for twenty-three years,

The sage signals the members of the Fire Nation Military to kneel.

HIGH SAGE (CONT'D) (cont'd)
You were our fearless leader in the Battle of Garsai, our matchless conqueror of the Hew Sin Provinces.

The sage signals Ozai to kneel.

HIGH SAGE (CONT'D) (cont'd)
You were father of Iroh, father of Ozai. Husband of Iylah, now passed. Grandfather of Lu Ten, now passed.

The sage signals Zuko and Azula to kneel.

HIGH SAGE (CONT'D) (cont'd)
Grandfather of Zuko and Azula. We lay you to rest.

He does something ceremonial to indicate the "laying to rest." Then he continues.

HIGH SAGE (cont'd)
As was your dying wish...

He pauses for an instant -- a moment of hesitation that tells us no one is sure if this is really true.

HIGH SAGE (CONT'D) (cont'd)
You are now succeeded by your second son.

Ozai rises. He faces the pyre and reaches into the fire for the ceremonial crown. He lifts it, flaming, onto his head.

HIGH SAGE (cont'd)
Hail Fire Lord Ozai!

The mourners prostrate themselves before Ozai in his fiery crown. Only Azula and Zuko sneak a look. Azula smiles up at their father, but Zuko searches the crowd of strangers. He looks fearfully at his psychopathic sister and his cold, scheming father and shivers. He is alone.

EXT. - TOWN LIMIT - SUNSET

Zuko rides out of town, conflicted with pride and shame. His posture is straight, but his eyes are set straight ahead and narrowed to avoid the dirty looks he's getting from the townspeople. They flank the road with their PITCHFORKS and HOES poised.

Atop his ostrich horse, Zuko is SILHOUETTED BY THE SETTING SUN -- The effect is eerily similar to that of Ozai, wearing the Fire Lord's flaming crown.

END OF SHOW